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NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS

THE KEELMEN OF NEWCASTLE

THE Webbs in one of their best books, defining trade union as "a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the condition of their employment", asserted that they had been unable to discover within the British Isles before the beginning of the eighteenth century anything falling precisely within this definition.¹ The guilds of the Middle Ages had been fundamentally associations of capitalists and entrepreneurs, while the bachelors' companies and the infrequent combinations of journeymen or workmen had been either subordinate to the will of their masters, ephemeral in character, friendly societies for co-operative benefit and assistance to the members, or for other purposes. Nor could the long-lived combinations of masons, so often forbidden by Parliament, be considered as early trade unions, since the members hired themselves not to employers but instead to the consumers direct. The origin of trade unionism in England they found just before the Industrial Revolution in certain skilled trades where the increasing amount of capital required to establish a business made it less possible for journeymen actually to become masters, and reducing them to the condition of life-long wage-earners, led them now to form new combinations of their own for the purpose of increasing their wages and bettering conditions. The typical instances were the tailors and the wool-combers, whose associations date from about the beginning of the eighteenth century.²

The keelmen of Newcastle-upon-Tyne may be cited as earlier instance of an organization of wage-earners who appear to have used their organization in attempts to increase their wages and remedy abuses, and so tended to become something like a trade union, representing, perhaps, a phase of transition from the old to the new. A great mass of records concerning the keelmen still exists in manuscript,³ which would probably reveal more clearly the structure of their organization and the ends which they sought to attain. Keelmen navigated the wherries or keels which plied upon the Tyne

¹ Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (new ed., London, 1907), p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 4-6, 8-10, 15, 16, 18, 21, 24, 25-31.

³ F. W. Dendy, introduction to *Extracts from the Records of the Company of Hostmen of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Surtees Society, CV., 1901), p. lii.

and the rivers nearby. Perhaps they carried various commodities,⁴ but as the great business of Newcastle came to be the export of sea-coal, they were occupied there almost entirely in transporting coal from the mine-staiths or wharves to the ships in which it was carried away. The keels in which they worked were the property of the hostmen of Newcastle, who by the beginning of the seventeenth century had obtained a monopoly of the coal business in this place. The keelmen, who were said to number about sixteen hundred, hired themselves to individual hostmen at certain wages for a year at a time. Many of them were Scots or Borderers. Some returned to Scotland in the winter season, but others with their wives and children occupied a particular part of the town, and had their own hospital and church and school.⁵

The "Kelemen" were organized in a by-trade or gild which is mentioned along with other "felawshipes or craftes" in a decree of Star Chamber in 1516.⁶ In 1607 it is spoken of as the "Company of Kelemen", and as a "Fraternity" somewhat later.⁷ This body, governed by stewards or overseers chosen from its own membership by the fitters or hostmen, undoubtedly exercised disciplinary control over its members.⁸ About 1699 they agreed to contribute from their wages towards a fund for the relief of their sick and poor, from which money a hospital or almshouse was built. That it might the better be collected they agreed that the hostmen should make the deduction from their wages, though they afterward complained of maladministration, and attempted to get entire control of the fund themselves.⁹

Whatever may have been the principal purposes of the keelmen's organization in the beginning, it is certain that as time went on they attempted collective bargaining with their employers, and entered into agreements with other keelmen in places nearby to compel employers to give them better wages or remedy abuses which were put upon them. In 1654 Whitelock notices "A Mutiny of the *Keelmen* at *Newcastle*, for increase of Wages".¹⁰ Not many years later they assembled tumultuously at Newcastle to complain of ill-treatment at the hands of the masters of the colliers as to wages. The "riot"

⁴ In 1560 payment was made "to iij kelman and a kell to go to sheall to cast furthe skyns". *Extracts from the Records of the Merchant Adventurers of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Surtees Society, CI., 1899), p. 170.

⁵ Dendy, p. 1.

⁶ Patent Roll, 8 Henry VIII., I. 15-16, printed in Gross, *The Gild Merchant*, II. 382.

⁷ *Surtees Society*, CV. 57; State Papers, Domestic, Entry Books, CXXX., May 16, 1738.

⁸ *Surtees Society*, CV. 157, 178.

⁹ Dendy, pp. 1, lii.

¹⁰ *Memorials* (London, 1682), p. 581.

was ended when the deputy-lieutenant raised a part of the trainbands.¹¹ In 1707 the Hostmen's Company resolved to blacklist many keelmen concerned in a petition to Parliament.¹² In 1710 the keelmen ceased work and riotously prevented navigation on the Tyne, and were not suppressed until the local militia had been called out and reinforced by six companies of the queen's troops. The trouble arose from discontent at the administration of the keelmen's fund and because of demands for better pay. The mayor asserted that some of their complaints had to do with their wages, "which they wou'd have encreased beyond what has been paid them these thirty years—With severall extravagant demands not in our power to grant them". The queen ordered an investigation of "the present Combinations and Complaints".¹³ Nine years later the keelmen of the Tyne joined with those upon the Wear in a combination to force an increase of wages and obtain relief from various abuses. They complained that the fitters, their employers, compelled them to do more work than previously and paid part of their wages in clothing and other necessities. This the fitters denied. The magistrates of Newcastle attempted to adjust the dispute, but the strikers not only refused to work, but would permit no fitter to make use of his keel, so that coal traffic was completely suspended. Such disorder resulted that troops were again despatched to the scene, and vigorous action taken. The keelmen persisted until their leaders were in prison and themselves reduced to destitution, when they submitted. The fitters on their part made some slight concessions.¹⁴ In 1738, because of "some grievencys", the keelmen struck and prevented others from working, and the local authorities appealed for military assistance to "remove the present obstruction to Trade".¹⁵ In 1750 there was another strike in which the keelmen remained idle for several weeks. The magistrates summoned men and masters, and, as they affirmed, redressed the just complaints immediately; "But the Men would not go to work without having their Wages advanced, which were very extravagant Demands". It was admitted that the men did no mischief, but several of the "Offenders" were committed to prison in the hope of bringing the others "to their Duty".¹⁶

¹¹ S. P. Dom., Entry Books, XXXI., June 4, 1671; Privy Council Register, LXIII., June 9, 1671; *Historical MSS. Commission Reports*, 12, VII. 79.

¹² *Surtees Society*, CV. 172.

¹³ S. P. Dom., Anne, XII., June 23, July 11, 21, 1710; S. P. Dom., Entry Books, CIX., June 17, 27, July 1, 4, August 1, 1710.

¹⁴ S. P. Dom., Regencies, LVII., May 15, 16, 17, 30, 1719; LXI., May 19, 21, June 4, 5, 9, 16, 1719; LXII., July 16, 1719; S. P. Dom., Entry Books, CCLXXXI., June 16, July 23, 1719.

¹⁵ S. P. Dom., Entry Books, CXXX., May 16, 1738.

¹⁶ S. P. Dom., George II., CXII., April 30, 1750.

It would seem, then, that the fellowship of keelmen at Newcastle, originally a by-trade, apparently subordinate to the Hostmen's Company, and certainly controlled by it, while continuing to exercise the functions of regulation, discipline, and benefit, for which it had been founded, developed other activities, in which it persevered as time went on. Always a body of wage-earners, during the latter part of the seventeenth century and in the early part of the eighteenth it strove for better conditions and sought increased wages for its members, and not only pursued the same objects but adopted some of the methods of the tailors and the woolcombers, among whom trade-unionism in England is acknowledged to have had its origin.

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THE CRIME OF W. H. CRAWFORD

At the time when I was writing my doctor's thesis on the *Civil Service and the Patronage*, it was fashionable for civil service reformers to consider the law of 1820 fixing the term of most presidential appointees at four years as the *fons et origo* of the spoils system and W. H. Crawford as its conscious author. In the effort to throw light on this point, I found many curious and some important things, but no proof of the charge. In fact, I inclined to the belief that Crawford had no intention of using the law to secure his election, and that the law itself, in addition to being in accord with the democratic tendencies of the day, had some justification as an administrative measure. It is to the consideration of the latter point that I wish to add an item.

In the seventeenth century the Propaganda was the most active and efficient as it was the newest department of the papacy. Its administrative problem was precisely that of the United States, only on a much larger scale, the control of agents rendered practically independent by distance. Inspection was difficult, and the same distance rendered the inspectors as uncontrollable as the inspected; each inspection resulted in charges and counter-charges rather than in action. Even if the charges were true, the unfrocking of a priest or the removal of a bishop created a scandal and was too heavy a penalty to be inflicted for a light offense or on suspicion however strong; just as Crawford told Monroe in 1820, what was true in 1820, that the removal of a public official simply because he was unsatisfactory put an unjust stain upon his character. The control of the papacy over its clergy in America was almost non-existent, and the control of the United States over its distant officials in 1820 was unsatisfactory.